

## **The Exalted Song of the Turnip Winter: Satire, Food, and the German Homefront**

Gille, Fritz. "Das Hohe Lied von der Kohlrübe". Translated by Richard Petit. German Historical Institute. March 12, 1917.

[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1732](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1732).

### **Headnote:**

This flyer presents the satirical song "The Exalted Song of the Rutabaga". Through humorous praise for the rutabaga and creative culinary suggestions, the song encapsulates the broader socio-political context of the time, offering insights into how ordinary people coped with scarcity and political unrest. It is signed by Fritz Gille, a respected local historian, and the depiction of civilian responses to food shortages aligns with modern scholarly analyses and other primary sources of the time, underscoring the significance of issues related to food shortages in understanding the experiences of German civilians during WWI.

### **Narrative:**

This source is a stand-alone flyer, with lyrics to a satirical song praising the "Kohlrübe", known in English as the rutabaga, called "The Exalted Song of the Rutabaga". During WWI, Allied blockades and a poor potato harvest caused severe food shortages in Germany, especially in the winter of 1916-1917. Out of necessity, Germans were forced to depend primarily on turnips and a close cousin, the rutabaga, for subsistence. These foods had previously been reserved for animal feed and were deeply unpopular. The song brings both the nationalism and struggle of Wilhelmine Germany to life, helping scholars today better understand both how common people coped with food shortages on the home front and giving insight to the greater political unrest of the time period. It also describes ways to eat the root vegetable, recreating pre-war dishes with the rutabaga as a substitute for beets, cabbage, and lard, potentially deepening previous understandings of how German common cuisine changed during the war. These food shortages were a significant source of conflict on the German homefront and part of the significant political upheaval of the time, so studying them shines light on the factors that made ordinary people rise up and eventually banish Kaiser Wilhelm, creating Germany's first Republic.

The only identifying piece of information on the document is the author, Fritz Gille's, name printed at the bottom. The flyer also reads "Im Selbstverlage des Verfassers", which translates to "Self-published by author", meaning that there is no outside publisher associated with the source and Gille was responsible for publishing it. The author's description in some of his other books show that Gille (1870-1938) was a printer, writer, and co-founder of a local history museum in Osterwieck, Germany. Three of his publications can be found on "Abebooks", a website for re-selling rare and collectible books. These titles, published between 1910 and 1938, reference local histories, covering subjects such as family research, Osterwieck over time, and satirical accounts of local history.<sup>1</sup> His book referencing satirical accounts of local history would be a likely source for this flyer, but as it is only available in one library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany and there are no digital copies online, I was unable to verify this. Its existence does corroborate that the Fritz Gille would be interested in this subject and is the same one who authored these three titles. His relationship to the song on the flyer is never specifically defined – as a local historian, he may have transcribed a popular song that others sang, or written it himself.

There is little information about Gille as a public figure available, but his son, Theo Gille, was a slightly more prominent local historian. Theo's wikipedia page describes Fritz as being a "Local poet and chronicler", and his obituary honors Theo for continuing "His father's life work" and following "[i]n his father's footsteps in 1958 by founding a working group of local chroniclers and local researchers."<sup>2</sup> Gille's background as a respected local historian is relevant to understanding the flyer that bears his name because it adds credibility to the source as being an accurate representation of popular sentiment regarding the Turnip Winter.

Comparing this flyer to scholarship and primary sources from the time period about eating habits is fascinating because much of the information is corroborated by historical research. Belinda Davis wrote an incredibly thorough analysis of popular attitudes towards WWI food shortages in *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (2000). She writes that as early as 1914-15, civilians sang satirical songs about food shortages,

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Gille. *Osterwiecker Mondschein-Chronik. Poetisch-Satyrische Heimat-Erinnerungen*. Osterwieck am Harz: Fallstein-Heimat 1921; Gille, Fritz. *Osterwieck am Harz im Wandel der Zeiten*. Osterwieck: Zickfeldt, 1910; Gille, Fritz. *Landsmann, woher dein Nam' und Art? Beiträge zur heimatlichen Familiennamenkunde und Sippenforschung*. Osterwieck: Zickfeldt, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia. 2016. "Theo Gille." Last modified October 2, 2021. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theo\\_Gille](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theo_Gille); Volksstimme, "Theo Gille leaves behind an invaluable life's work". November 8, 2011. <https://www.volksstimme.de/lokal/halberstadt/theo-gille-hinterlasst-ein-unschatzbares-lebenswerk-447517>

and includes one about potatoes: “Potatoes in the morning, at noon in the broth, in evenings along with their peels, potatoes forever!”<sup>3</sup> Satirical songs, like these two examples, have a unique ability to resonate with audiences, offering a powerful medium through which shared experiences and emotions can be articulated and disseminated within communities.

Satirical pieces, especially in the form of comedies, cabaret shows, and cinemas, as described in Jan Rürger’s 2009 article “Laughter and War in Berlin”, had immense political power as a means of protest during WWI. Rürger describes Kaiser Wilhelm as “[o]pposing all forms of wartime laughter.”<sup>4</sup> What the Kaiser did permit was “German laughter”, a specific kind of humor popularized by Friedrich Nietzsche that approached serious subjects with a sense of comedy. While in Rürger’s article, this is a source of conflict between the people and government that eventually leads to the flourishing of “un-serious” comedy, the satirical Song of the Rutabaga is an everyday example of how people used “German laughter” to cope with the hardship of their wartime experiences. This song attempts to make a vegetable that was described by Roger Chickering and elaborated on by Geoffrey Giles as being a “Loathsome guest”, with “its texture stringy, its smell vile, its taste worse,”<sup>5</sup> into an object of wonder and delicacy. By transforming the rutabaga, a symbol of scarcity and hardship, into the subject of satire and humor, individuals were able to reclaim a sense of agency and resilience in the face of adversity.

The Berlin State Library features a cookbook entirely dedicated to preparing the rutabaga, called the “New Rutabaga War Cookbook: Practical Instructions for Preparing Various Rutabaga Dishes”.<sup>6</sup> From simple preparations, such as boiling the vegetable to more inventive uses, including incorporating it into rice pudding or combining it with spoiled potato to reduce food waste, the cookbook showcases the creativity that civilians used in preparing the Rutabaga and trying to recreate pre-war dishes. It even includes culturally specific recipes that would appeal to different regions of the country, such as East Prussia, south Germany, and a recipe for an adapted Pichelsteiner, which is a Bavarian dish. Interestingly enough, this was not a

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<sup>3</sup> Belinda J. Davis. *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. p. 49

<sup>4</sup> Jan Rürger. “Laughter and War in Berlin.” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 67 (2009): 23–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646207>.

<sup>5</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J., Roger Chickering, and Jay Winter. *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 3 (2009): 728–30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/649114>.

<sup>6</sup> Ida Keller. *Neues Kohlrüben Kochbuch: Praktische Anweisung zur Bereitung der verschiedensten Speisen von Kohlrüben* (Chemnitz: Robert Friese, 1917)

government-sponsored document, but instead published by a private bookstore. Thus, its origins as a civilian document emphasize the ingenuity of how German civilians coped with the crisis of food shortages amongst themselves. Davis interestingly notes that this propaganda, even when not produced by governments, made Berliners even angrier about the shortages they faced.<sup>7</sup>

Issues surrounding food shortages and availability were a significant cause of violence and unrest on the homefront. Politics surrounding rations led to conflict between rural and urban populations, as rural food producers did not receive extra rations for their physical labor, as industrial workers did. Additionally, rural women's share of labor increased significantly during the war as there was a need to compensate for the lack of a young male labor force. Rural consumers, however, typically had a much more adequate supply of food than urban populations during the war.<sup>8</sup> Women, especially lower-class ones, rioted in protest of the rationing system, which was a significant part of the larger Wilhemine political state being destabilized during the war, and eventually ending soon after.

Heather Perry, in "Onward Kitchen Soldiers! Gender, Food, and Health in Germany's Long Great War" argues that the food shortages of the war fundamentally changed the role of German women and their relationship to the kitchen. There was a "Concerted and widespread effort to enlist women as 'kitchen soldiers' - homemakers whose daily choices could help or hinder the nation at war", a remarkable parallel to the way that women in the satirical song of the Rutabaga are called on to support the war effort.<sup>9</sup>

World War I, for the first time, enlisted civilians in the war effort with the concept of Total War. As the entire economy shifted to support the war effort, women and those at home were recruited as having an equally vital role as soldiers on the front lines. The last stanza of "The Exalted Song of the Rutabaga" envisions the end of the war, when "Not only laurel will adorn the victor's steel helmet - Crown everyone who has stayed at home".<sup>10</sup> Whether it was with new recipes to make the situation more tolerable, a specifically government-endorsed form of humor, or as a source of conflict, the kinds of foods and way they were received by civilians define the wartime experiences of millions of Germans.

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<sup>7</sup> Davis. *Home Fires Burning*. p. 205

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Ziemann. *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923*. New York: Berg, 2006. p. 155

<sup>9</sup> Heather Merle Benbow and Heather R. Perry, eds. *Food, Culture and Identity in Germany's Century of War*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Fritz Gille. "Das Hohe Lied von der Kohlrübe". Translated by Richard Petit. German Historical Institute. March 12, 1917. [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1732](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1732)

### Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Keller, Ida. *Neues Kohlrüben Kochbuch: Praktische Anweisung zur Bereitung der verschiedensten Speisen von Kohlrüben* (Chemnitz: Robert Friese, 1917)

[https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN684753898&PHYSID=PHYS\\_0001&DMDID=DMDLOG\\_0001](https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN684753898&PHYSID=PHYS_0001&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001)

This book's title translates to "New Rutabaga War Cookbook: Practical Instructions for Preparing Various Rutabaga Dishes". The entire cookbook is available online via the Berlin State Library, although only in German. As Merle writes in *Food, Culture and Identity in Germany's Century of War*, it provides general nutritional information, as well as recipes suited to regional tastes.

Gille, Fritz. *Osterwiecker Mondschein-Chronik. Poetisch-Satyrische Heimat-Erinnerungen*.

Osterwieck am Harz: Fallstein-Heimat 1921;

Gille, Fritz. *Osterwieck am Harz im Wandel der Zeiten*. Osterwieck: Zickfeldt, 1910;

Gille, Fritz. *Landsmann, woher dein Nam' und Art? Beiträge zur heimatlichen Familiennamenkunde und Sippenforschung*. Osterwieck: Zickfeldt, 1938.

I have collapsed the citations for Gille's three published works into one citation because I was unable to access the content of any of these texts, so their mere existence is the most important piece of information about them to my research.

Davis, Belinda. *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin*.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

This monograph examines how food shortages affected daily life in the same way that my primary source does, and centers women in its analysis. Her primary argument is that the failure of the Wilhelmine Government to provide adequate food supplies during the war was a significant factor in their loss of public support and a catalyst that led to the development of new kinds of political activism, especially by lower-class women.

Ziemann, Benjamin. *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*. New York: Berg, 2006.

This book, originally written in German and later translated into English, stresses that the First World War was one of the most important turning points in German history.

Ziemann focuses on the experiences of the rural populace because it represents the intersection of the agricultural industry and citizens' experiences, and illustrates the connection between war and home front.

Rüger, Jan. "Laughter and War in Berlin." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 67 (2009): 23–43.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646207>.

This article is one of the only significant analyses of satire in Germany during WWI that fits in the fairly narrow category of satire that I feel relates to my primary source because it focuses specifically on how the masses of Germany used satire to cope with the wartime experience. Rüger examines the ways that civilians created a "popular humor", how they discerned what was legitimate and appropriate for the conflict, and how the government promoted a particular type of "German humor" that was, by definition, serious. He emphasizes that promotion or creation of laughter is an inherently political subject which expresses the larger conflicts of war and the wartime experience.

Giles, Geoffrey J., review of *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* by Roger Chickering and Jay Winter. *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 3 (2009): 728–30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/649114>.

This review centers on the author's repulsive descriptions of the Rutabaga, calling "Its texture stringy, its smell vile, its taste worse". The book uses Freiburg as a case study of the impact of WWI on German civilians and uses vivid descriptions of the food (or lack thereof), markets, industry, and streets to bring the city to life today. Giles' critiques mostly revolve around the length of the book, but emphasize the importance of Chickering's descriptions of the Rutabaga because they give readers a sense of the same stress that a resident of Freiburg would have experienced at the time.

*Volksstimme*, "Theo Gille leaves behind an invaluable life's work". November 8, 2011.  
<https://www.volksstimme.de/lokal/halberstadt/theo-gille-hinterlasst-ein-unschatzbares-lebenswerk-447517>

Theo Gille, in a local obituary, is honored for continuing "His father's life work" and following "In his father's footsteps in 1958 by founding a working group of local chroniclers and local researchers".

Benbow, Heather Merle, and Heather R. Perry, eds. *Food, Culture and Identity in Germany's Century of War*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

This is a collection of essays about the role of food in warfare. The first four chapters deal with WWI, while the rest of the collection is concerned with WWII and Cold War Germany. Within those first several essays is a significant amount of information about

how German civilians coped with wartime rations, how food practices were shaped long-term, and how the responsibility of women as they prepared food for their families changed from being a mere act of survival to part of the wartime effort.

Wikipedia. 2016. "Theo Gille." Last modified October 2, 2021.

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theo\\_Gille](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theo_Gille)

Theo's German page describes Fritz as a "Local poet and chronicler" in Osterwieck. The page has been edited multiple times, by multiple different authors from 2016 to 2021, which I feel supports it as being an accurate source. The page also has multiple citations, although the information about his personal life remains uncited, potentially weakening this source as an accurate portrayal of his life.